

## FOREWORD

### *TEMPLE HAUPTFLEISCH*

A large proportion of the literature on Africa over the centuries has relied on an interesting assumption, one that I think needs to be challenged far more than it often is. I have come to think of it as the “*Africa* conundrum”, that unquestioning belief that somehow there is, there must be, a (single, indivisible) entity called “Africa” – and arising from that, a definable, recognisable and somehow unique quality one might refer to as “Africanness”, which can somehow be recognised, measured, described, evaluated and even reproduced.

A somewhat fallacious belief, if you come to think about it – particularly in the light of the following statistics:

Africa is the world’s second-largest continent, after Asia, in size and population. It consists of 58 different countries, ranging from the tropics to some of the largest and driest deserts in the world. In 2009 it had a population 991,002,342 people, which can be subdivided into hundreds of ethnic groups – each generally having its own language, or dialect of a language, and its own distinctive cultural, social, political, economic and value systems. These groups speak between 1,500–2,000 languages, with possibly as many as 8,000 dialects (plus, of course, the many colonially imported languages adapted, incorporated, localised and used by a large number of those countries – which are now as much part of the continent’s polyglot nature as are the “original” languages). The continent is host to a large percentage of the world’s religions, a range of political, economic and other systems, some of them home-grown, many of them imported (and then absorbed and “naturalised”) over the course of the centuries.

Clearly *Africa* is not one coherent and monolithic entity or system at all (beyond being a single and very large continent), but a complex, polysystemic amalgam of many political, linguistic, social, cultural and economic sub-systems. And what is true of the African continent as a whole is equally true of its sub-regions, and even – to greater or lesser extent – each of the 58 countries that currently go to make up

the whole geopolitical entity named Africa. Few of those sub-entities are *unicultural* by any stretch of the imagination, for most African countries are unabashedly multicultural and multilingual in structure.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, when one steps back a tad and thinks honestly about it, what do terms such as *Asian*, *American* (*North American*, *South American*), *Middle Eastern*, *European* or *Western* actually mean anyway? Most of them (*The Orient* or *The Middle East*, for example) are simply vague and generalised geographic indicators, conjured up by planners, writers and politicians in Europe or the USA in order to talk about the regions beyond their own defined “reality”. Are these names and the ideas behind them less ambiguous, or do they actually refer to some kind of homogeneous entity? Surely not. Therefore we do not – and indeed we *cannot* – use a term like *European* (or any of the others listed above) at all loosely or simply, for the concept of *Europe* is itself an ever shifting, ever changing construct, little more than a broad geographical reference to a constellation of socio-political and economic entities (which, in their turn, consist of polysystemic constellations of differing cultural, social, political and economic sub-systems).<sup>2</sup>

These are naturally very sensitive and hotly debated issues, not only about theatre and performance, but about places, peoples, languages, religions, politics, economics, the arts and everything else. Yet we do *use* such terms, even in the title to this particular book.

So, for the purposes of this book and the Working Group, what then would qualify something as “African”? Perhaps, as Kole Omotoso pointed out to me, the first thing you must actually ask yourself is: “What *Africa* am I talking about?” – what region, socio-cultural context, what peoples, what forms are we talking about, comparing and evaluating?

A similar ambiguity applies when we wish to talk of *African theatre*, of course: what exactly do we mean then? *Is* there in fact such a thing as a distinctive “*African*” performance? If so, what would be its unique distinguishing qualities and characteristics?

One of the stock answers in the past has been that the concept of *theatre* as we know it is simply a European construct, based on the European experience – a concept foisted on the continent of Africa in the colonial period. A continent, by the way, which does not have a word for theatre in many of its indigenous languages. So the very notion of *theatre* becomes a problem as well: once again one may ask – is this truly so, is there is really one single, identifiable thing

(system or tradition) which one may call *theatre* and trust that everyone understands the same thing by it?

There are, of course, a range of narrow and explicit ‘definitions’ deduced from specific examples (see Aristotle, for instance) and then utilised to discuss and categorise a specific kind of literary form, one that has been canonised in the drama histories published in the countries of Europe and their colonies and allied regions, particularly over the past century or two. If one were to meticulously compare even the most canonical plays from the European region (e.g. of Sophocles, Shakespeare, Lope de Vega, Racine, Molière, Schiller, Chekhov, Pirandello, Beckett or Stoppard, for instance), what would be truly obvious would surely be the *differences* between the works, rather than the few similarities in plot, convention and physical staging practice that one may identify (in some cases). And inevitably the same would apply if you start looking at the canon of Asian theatre or North American theatre.

Proceeding from there, if one were then to acknowledge that such works are but a fragment of the whole range of possible performed events that may occur every year, then add the vast range of other performance forms now accepted and studied as part of the larger canvas of “European performance” – e.g. the numerous oral forms, the mummery, puppetry, festivals, dance, opera, music hall, cabaret, the musical, circus and the rest – to our tally of *theatrical events*, then the very *diversity* of it all would be its most distinguishing point of *European* (or *Western*) *theatre and performance* – as indeed it is, and has always been, of so-called *Asian theatre* and *African theatre*.

In this respect, for example, all the things so often trotted out as the distinctive and differentiating qualities of theatre in Africa – the role of ritual, of social engagement, of dance and orality – are most likely as applicable to so-called “Western theatre” or “Asian theatre” as they are to “African theatre”. In addition, the methods and techniques employed may even be the same for *all* so-called performance forms – whether called drama, theatre, dance, show business or performance. Thus the tendency for many Western-trained academics (myself included) to view the most obvious general distinctions between regional theatre systems (African and Western theatre, for instance) as a set of binary opposites (e.g. theatre as religious ritual as opposed to theatre as art, theatre as social ritual as opposed to theatre as entertainment, orality versus literacy, text versus performance, etc.) is perhaps a facile misreading of the history of performance over the centuries by people who have been trained

to look for certain kinds of structures and expecting to find distinguishing signs of *difference* – and thus, inevitably, finding what they are looking for. Perhaps, if such apparent binaries do exist, then they are not so much *binary opposites* as two extreme but linked points on a *continuum of meaning*.

So, perhaps the difference lies not in the elements, events, theories or methods themselves, but rather in the culturally shaped and value-driven *interpretations* of such particular issues and the institutions and systems that have been created to drive and maintain them.

If this is so, it seems obvious that one can only refer to and discuss the drama, theatre and performance of a region in conceptual terms (i.e. theatre as a *concept* – or set of concepts), not as something concrete and tangible, and can thus only talk about it theoretically and generically, pointing out its many and divergent characteristics, and the multitude of possible functions the genre can and does have in society. But once one considers theatre and performance history, it is clearly not found in the general theories and definitions, but in the *particulars*: the particular play, the particular text, the particular performance, the particular techniques, the particular theatrical event – and in the consideration of the *particular* social, political, cultural, moral, economic and even academic context of each.

In this regard the problem for African scholars studying theatre on the continent has not been the nature of performance or the theatrical event *per se*, but the ways in which the Western academic system has conditioned us all to *view* such an event (despite the best efforts of radical thinkers and writers such as Turner, Schechner and others) and the techniques, methodologies, theories and conventions that have been evolved for doing so and talking about them. In addition, the publication channels that have evolved for recording and distributing such research have also become a barrier rather than a help to some researchers. In other words, our basic training and the concepts of theatre study and research that such training is based upon have perhaps made it impossible for us to see beyond our own academic expectations and conditioning.

This issue became a point of some debate within the working group (and also features in some of the chapters of this book) and brings us to a particularly thought-provoking statement by Linda Tuhiwai Smith<sup>3</sup> (1999: 1), who famously stated that “‘research’ is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary”. A most apposite point, especially when one considers

the issues raised above, for her statement (and the influential book in which it appears) refers to the argument that the analytical, interrogative and narrative strategies we have come to employ (and take for granted) in our (Western-generated) research have more often than not been imposed on us by the processes of colonialism (and by the conventions evolved by the international academic community, and the academic apparatus to which it gave birth). More importantly, Smith points out that they *still* affect the way we do research and judge our own research outcomes.

So a powerful argument can be (and is often) made that the principles, theories and methodologies of research should be derived from our *own* specific contexts and requirements, and focussed on the objects we study, rather than being imposed from the outside.

The problem, then, seems to be: how to balance the demands of our *specific* research, with the demands of the international academic community (a community that includes us, here on the African continent)? The fact is, it is often the world “out there” that we are trying to access – not only for our own academic and economic benefit and advancement, but in order to make the world take our arts and our approach to those arts more seriously. To do so, like it or not, we at times do have to use the academic channels of communication of that “other” world, obeying their rules in order to make them understand our points of view.

This, of course, was one of the core areas we had hoped to probe and discuss with the research seminars set up by the IFTR working group, and is in part, I think, where Kene Igweonu and his colleagues ultimately hope to go with the working group projects.

In this book the context is Africa and the topic is theatre and performance on the African continent at a particular point in the history of the region and a particular phase in the evolution of the field of theatre and performance studies. In this case the problems outlined above are dealt with as a montage of ideas, presented through a mosaic of individual and specific articles based on first-hand experiences by authors primarily living and working on the African continent. It is, at this point, perhaps the only way it can be done.

It has been my very great fortune and pleasure over the past four years to have been involved in the creation of this book in a variety of ways. From my South African perspective, the experience has been both informative and enlightening, and the chance to work with members of the AT&P group, especially during the Stellenbosch

workshop in March 2010, not only broadened my perspective immensely, but forced me to confront a few extremely well entrenched preconceptions, some of which I have tried to address above.

The appearance of this book, the first project to be undertaken by the IFTR's Working Group on African Theatre and Performance, is therefore a source of immense joy to me and I believe to the IFTR executive, for it – like the founding of the group itself – is not only an important event in the dynamic evolution of the IFTR itself over the past 15 years or so (see Kene Igweonu's Introduction), but also a valuable addition to theatre scholarship in Africa as a whole.

I would like to congratulate Kene and his team for making it happen and for doing it so well. May this be the first of a series of explorations of the fascinating world of theatre and performance on the continent of Africa.

## NOTES

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- 1 For example, according to the Wikipedia entry on Nigeria, it is the most populous country on the continent, has more than 250 ethnic groups, using 510 living languages, and each group identified with varying customs.
  - 2 The changing map of Europe over the centuries is an interesting study in this regard. Nowhere has this flux been more apparent than in recent years, as we have seen the European Union evolve. The current list of members of the EU now runs to 27 countries, not all of them historically part of "Europe", and with more memberships being negotiated every year.
  - 3 Linda Tuhiwai Smith *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, London: Zed Books, 1999: page 1.